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Ghanaian International Novelists And Popular Aesthetics: Appropriation And Revision

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Abstract

The critics of Ghanaian novels written in English mobilise three main approaches to study them: first, Africanist literary criticism which approaches texts through the perspective of the oral tradition, and seeks mainly to document the influence of traditional verbal arts on their production; second, Marxist / social realist criticism which adopts a sociological approach, and focuses on class struggle in African societies as induced by the experience of colonialism; finally, postcolonial literary theory which sees the Ghanaian novel as a locus for discursive strategies that grapple with the assumptions of colonialist discourse. In this paper, however, we intend to explore a new approach to the Ghanaian fiction based on the literary aesthetic of “market fictions”, also called popular fictions, as opposed to the international texts produced by “elite” or well known “international” novelists, such as Kofi Awoonor, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Amma Darko, and published by international publishers, such as Heinemann and McMillan.

Keywords: appropriation, literary aesthetic, popular fictions, publishers, discursive strategies

Introduction

To achieve our task, we are going to survey the growth of popular literature in Ghana, outline its characteristics, and then apply some of its features on fictions written by two international novelists, namely Ayi Kwei Armah and Ama Ata Aidoo. Our discussion of the two novelists' works, however, will not be limited to the illustration of their indebtedness to popular aesthetic. We will also endeavour to show how they revised their borrowings from local aesthetic and fitted them within their fictions to meet local audiences' expectations and to answer their concerns about issues related to poverty and wealth, marriage and conjugal life, ambition and corruption.

Ghanaian Popular Fictions: Scope, Origin and Growth

Ghanaian popular literature consists of pulp fictions, pamphlets and didactic handbooks dealing mostly with marriage and love issues, printed by local presses and sold in local

trading centres. From the 1950s through the 1970s, it witnessed an unprecedented growth, what led critic Richard Priebe to call this period in Ghanaian literary history “a literary renaissance” (“Popular Writing” 85). The origin of this flowering in popular fictions goes back to the 1920s and 1930s, when a huge number of literary clubs and debating societies were formed by newly-literate teachers, clerks, factory workers, high school-leavers and civil servants. These literary clubs and societies featured the following names: the Optimism Club, the Eureka Club, the Cosmos Literary Club, St. Augustine’s Theological College, Students’ Self-Help Club, the Anum Improvement Society, the Kumasi Gentlemen’s Club etc. Their members were mostly secondary-school leavers, educated in local Christian schools. They had no opportunities to pursue higher education and were keen on continuing reading and developing their skills. The debating societies aimed at, among other things, “to foster an intelligent interest in the community in all literary and social activities, to inculcate upon its members the advantages derivable from literary and social pursuits, and to educate public minds on all current affairs by means of public debates, lectures, talks and so forth” (quoted in Newell, *Ghanaian* 55).

Though the literary clubs were inspired by the colonial education acquired by its members, the fictions published in the 1950s through the 1970s concur well with traditional Ghanaian oral culture, especially as most of these fictions and pamphlets appealed to folktales and developed a proverbial discourse. Furthermore, like in traditional storytelling, they took “for granted a mode of reception in which authors and audiences share responsibility for the production of meaning” (Newell, *Ghanaian* 29). This means that, in the production of popular fictions, writers and readers share interpretive conventions related to social and gender roles, and which are culturally specific to local communities.

The Features of Ghanaian Popular Fictions

Unlike the pastoral and insular tendency of early African novels, such as Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drunkard*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi Wa Thiong’O’s *The River Between*, popular fictions and pamphlets in Ghana are “an *urban* phenomenon, conveying urban aspirations and fantasies, and assisting readers in their efforts to come to term with crime and poverty and urban living conditions generally” (Newell “Introduction” 6, her emphasis). Furthermore, they are predicated by “a deep sense of *gravitas*, of serious commitment to the welfare of the *polis*, the people of the state” (Priebe, “The Novel” 835). Indeed, Ghanaian popular fictions unfold along a “*moral trajectory*” and are intended, to quote a local author, “to help the young man in making up his own mind in certain things in his own present society ... [such as] the problems he is likely to face if he goes in to get married” (quoted in Newell, *Ghanaian*).

For local audiences, writers have a “vital role to play, as readers’ guides, educators, advisors, moralists and counsellors”, who teach, among other lessons, that: “people who make a luxurious living by dubious means suffer after all. Also, people who are hard-working and committed succeed after all.” (Newell, *Ghanaian* 31) This didactic purpose seems to participate in the same educative role as the one Achebe assigned to the African writer, when he wrote that the African novelist cannot “be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done” (“The Novelist as Teacher” 44)

Popular Narratives and International African Fiction

Even if they seem dissimilar in aesthetic and social focus, international African fiction and popular narratives can be seen to connect in important ways, not least in their common concerns with the moral health of society and in their deployment of similar character types. To illustrate this similarity, let us analyse the fictions of Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah. The readers who are familiar with Armah's first novels know that he is a moralist at heart. For instance, his first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), is a social satire concerned with the rampant corruption in independent Ghana and the crass materialism induced by neo-colonial consumer's ethic. Armah's readers also know that his characters are flat figures, sometimes mere caricatures: the man in *The Beautiful Ones* is pale and nameless, most of the time acted upon than acting on his surrounding environment; his wife Oyo is a woman unsatisfied with her lot and enticed by luxury items she can never afford; as for Koomson, the big shot, he is a corrupt minister who has made his wealth through swindling.

All Armah's characters mentioned above find their match in popular fictions and sustain readings along the lines of popular character types. For example, the Man represents the poor citizen who attempts to make his living through honest means, whereas Koomson stands for a gangster figure and a sugar daddy who goes to night clubs and has many mistresses. Furthermore, the final happy reintegration of the Man into his family and the ultimate demise of Koomson who escapes through the latrines conform to the popular readership expectation which considers that: "people who make a luxurious living by dubious means suffer after all. Also, people who are hard-working and committed succeed after all. Armah's women characters, too, sustain a reading along the same popular lines. These characters are often decried by feminist critics as mere caricatures. Actually, they are typecasts who function as moral commentaries. As such, they should not be understood as realist figures. In this sense, Oyo and Estella cannot stand for the true image of the Ghanaian woman. Because they are familiar with the kind of shrewd and greedy wives in popular fictions, local readers, both male and female, would never mistake Armah's women with the realist representation of the Ghanaian woman. On the contrary, they would identify with the social and moral themes of his novel and make projections on their own life for the sake of coping with their problems of poverty and hard living.

Ama Ata Aidoo is the other Ghanaian international author who seems to have found inspiration in local, popular plots, character types and themes. Like Armah's 1960s and early 1970s novels, her early collection of short stories, *No Sweetness Here* (1970) testifies to that influence. Deeply anchored in the post-colonial actuality of Ghana, this book explores issues and themes that relate to tradition, neo-colonialism, corruption, gender relations etc, from a perspective similar to that of African international writers. Nonetheless, the bulk of the stories retain many aspects of popular concerns and aesthetic, which they not only appropriate, but also revise. For example, many statements are made about marriage in the book, to the extent that it emerges as one of its most important themes. On that score, Aidoo endorses an important Ghanaian proverb which says that a bad marriage kills the soul (p. 62).

The story which best illustrates Aidoo's appropriation and revision of popular themes is "Two Sisters", which tells about Mercy, a young girl of nineteen, and her eager desire to enjoy the

blessings of wealth and luxury. Mercy is a half educated girl who lives with Sissie, her sister, and James, Sissie's husband, in a small city flat. Her work as a typist does not content her, nor does her unfortunate boyfriend. This is why she keeps complaining about her lot: "it's just I am sick of everything: the office, living with you [ie Sissie] and your husband. I want a husband of my own, children ..." (p. 89). Mercy's dreams push her to jilt her boyfriend and go with a sugar-daddy, an old wealthy married man called Mensar Arthur, whose wealth offers her an outlet to escape poverty and realize her romantic dreams, such as her fancy to drive along a beach very close to the sea, "until the tyres of the car touch the water" (p. 94).

To a great extent, Mercy's wicked involvement is analogous to popular love stories which depict modern, urban women corrupted by Western lifestyles and corrupting the home of innocent fellow men. However, contrary to these works, Aidoo does not hold the young women entirely responsible for the immoral outcome of their actions. Instead, she is careful to denounce the collusion in her society between power and money, on the one hand, and money and the exploitation of women, on the other. As stated by one of the characters, in Ghanaian cities, the rule is that "money is power and power is money". Aidoo shows also that the girls' youthful dreams and desires for material comfort makes them easy preys to the licentious behaviour of men of power, such as MP Mensar Arthur, and Captain Ashey, Mercy's sugar-daddies. Her uncompromising stand on the depravity of local political elites is put forward in the following authorial comment on Mercy's first relationship with a sugar-daddy: "here is a fifty year old big man who thinks he is a somebody and a twenty three old child who choose a silly way to conquer unconquerable problems" (p. 96).

Aidoo's sympathy towards young women's yearning for love, wealth and lavish spending is expressed in "From Whom Things Did Not Change", the story which condemns the debauched behaviour of wealthy men who spoil the innocence of "little frightened creatures from villages and developing shims who have come to this citadel of an alien culture to be turned into ladies" (p.5). This statement is a clear indictment of the behaviour of wealthy, decadent men, who ruin the morality of traditional life and destroy the dreams of poor women of the country side. It also makes a clear stand against their promiscuous life which causes women to be oppressed by the forces of power and money: "sometimes they [the parents] are not afraid of the daughter herself but the big man because he has big power, and can ruin them if they don't give him what he wants, their daughter. Oh Allah! What times we live in, what rulers we have? How can men behave in this way, who are our lords?" (p. 10).

What Armah's and Aidoo's appropriations and revisions of popular aesthetics show is the importance of the popular fiction in the shaping of what came to be known in the 1960s as Ghanaian international or elite novels. This influence of young, anonymous, popular authors on the major international novelists has often been glossed over by Western and African critics, unaware as they were of the tremendous flowering in local writings and the organic junction between the two strands, the elite and the popular, in Ghanaian fiction. And yet, as our paper has tried to illustrate, popular literature is a necessary link in the understanding of international novels. Its concerns with urban morality has shaped themes, plots and characters to such an extent that one is urged to question the critical consensus which demarcates the one from the other. Finally, it is our conviction that the studies in African fiction will gain a lot in

dissolving the arbitrary boundaries between the two kinds of fiction and acknowledging the complexity of their literary discourse.

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